



1LT Matthew Stapleton, a member of the North Carolina Army National Guard, from Wilmington, N.C., shakes hands with a fisherman near Bartunac, Bosnia, as his interpreter (at left) looks on.

A Presence In Bosnia

**Story by MSG Bob Haskell
Photos by SSG Bob Jordan**

WHEN 1LT Matt Stapleton returns to the classroom later this year, he will have some first-hand accounts of his tour in Bosnia to share with his students. Not all of the stories will be pleasant.

The National Guard infantry officer returned to his home in North Carolina in March after spending the fall and winter months keeping the peace in Central Europe as part of NATO operations there.

"I'll have a Bosnia story for just about everything I teach — World War I, the Great Depression, you name it," Stapleton said after leading a six-hour "presence patrol" into the community of Bratunac and along the Drina River.

Five years of peace in Bosnia have failed to heal many of the wounds left by four years of internecine conflict among the former warring factions living in the newly-independent nation.

It was, however, an important winter for the Army National Guard. During the six-month rotation in the U.S. sector, commanded by the Army's 3rd Infantry Division, National Guard troops patrolled the countryside and worked with local populations to make sure the delicate peace now



NCARNG SPC Anthony Ozmorem shares his drinking water with a local woman during a presence patrol. Most such patrols were conducted by active-Army troops until last fall.

existing in the region is not shattered.

Although Guard soldiers have been part of the NATO peacekeeping force from the start, most presence patrols in the American sector were conducted by active-Army soldiers until last fall — even when the Texas Army Guard's 49th Armored Div. ran the operation last spring and summer.

One hundred seventy-six soldiers

from North Carolina's 30th Inf. Brigade and 170 soldiers from Oklahoma's 45th Inf. Bde. began pulling that particular duty with active-Army soldiers after weeks of training back home.

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SGT William Andrews, also of the North Carolina Army Guard, opens the front gate at Camp Dobol as the vehicles of a mounted presence patrol prepare to leave the base camp.

For the most part, it was an uneventful and unusually mild winter in the Balkans. At Camp Dobol, for example, soldiers pulled guard duty, drove visitors to and from the U.S. sector's headquarters in nearby Tuzla, and conducted the presence patrols.

"It took active-duty folks time to realize that we know our jobs and can do this," said 1SG John Hayes, who served the previous six months with his 49th Armd. Div. comrades, then served this rotation on liaison duty with U.S. Army, Europe.

"Early on, there was concern whether active or reserve-component troops would be assigned to the tough, contentious areas such as Brcko and Srebrenica," Hayes said. "I don't hear that anymore. The 3rd Inf. Div. leaders now know that National Guard troops can handle themselves as well as the active forces."

The jobs that Guard soldiers performed and the places they saw are the sources of the stories that Stapleton will take back to his students.

Many of the North Carolina soldiers, for example, guarded a mass grave outside Bratunac during the first part of their tour.

Local interpreter Eldar Hadziefexidic, a young Muslim man, explained that United Nations workers had earlier exhumed the remains of about 200 Muslims, reportedly killed by Serbs during the summer of 1995.

The grave, a couple of acres of mud surrounded by leafless plum trees and the rubble of blown-up houses, was closed off for the winter.

"There were piles of bones and skulls," said SPC Kevin Bryan. "The

place stank. Even our clothes stank. It sure wasn't like home,"

Homes scarred by bullet holes, and a nearby soccer field and school where Serbs reportedly killed many more Muslims, are other grim reminders of the violence that happened here.

"Ten thousand people are still missing from Srebrenica," said Eldar. "Most of them are Muslim boys and young men, presumed to be dead."

Yet, five years after the fighting ended, there is hope among the horror of overgrown fields that are still heavily mined and where a girl's foot was blown off during the winter, Stapleton said.

Corncribs are filled with golden

ears, and fat chickens peck and scratch beside farmhouses. People are moving back to the homes they were forced to abandon during the fighting, and they are tilling the land.

The Guard soldiers supported that effort, disregarding the ethnic ties of the people they saw during their presence patrols.

"How is everything?" "Is anyone bothering you?" "Has anyone asked you to leave?" were routine questions Stapleton asked Serbs who had taken over the houses that once belonged to their Muslim neighbors.

"Everything is well. Yes, we are all right," people replied.

Small, rubber balls were a hit with children the soldiers met in the cities and along rural roads.

"My wife sent me about a million of them," said Stapleton. "We gave them to the kids wherever we could."

After four years in the active Army and 10 years in the Guard, he understands the importance of a friendly but forceful presence, and the wisdom in Theodore Roosevelt's words about talking softly and carrying a big stick.

"This is a perfect job for infantry units that are not at war," said Stapleton of the armed peacekeeping presence. "Nothing happens in a town that has a lot of cops."

He is also a good enough historian to appreciate his interpreter's comment about the war in which some of Eldar's friends died, and in whose shadow the country still lives.

"Nothing good came from the war, and nobody won," Eldar lamented. □



SPC Jack Fone, a member of the NCARNG's Co. A, 1st Bn., 120th Inf., stands in the hatch of his Humvee as it passes a horse-drawn wagon during a mounted presence patrol near Bratunac.